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# THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

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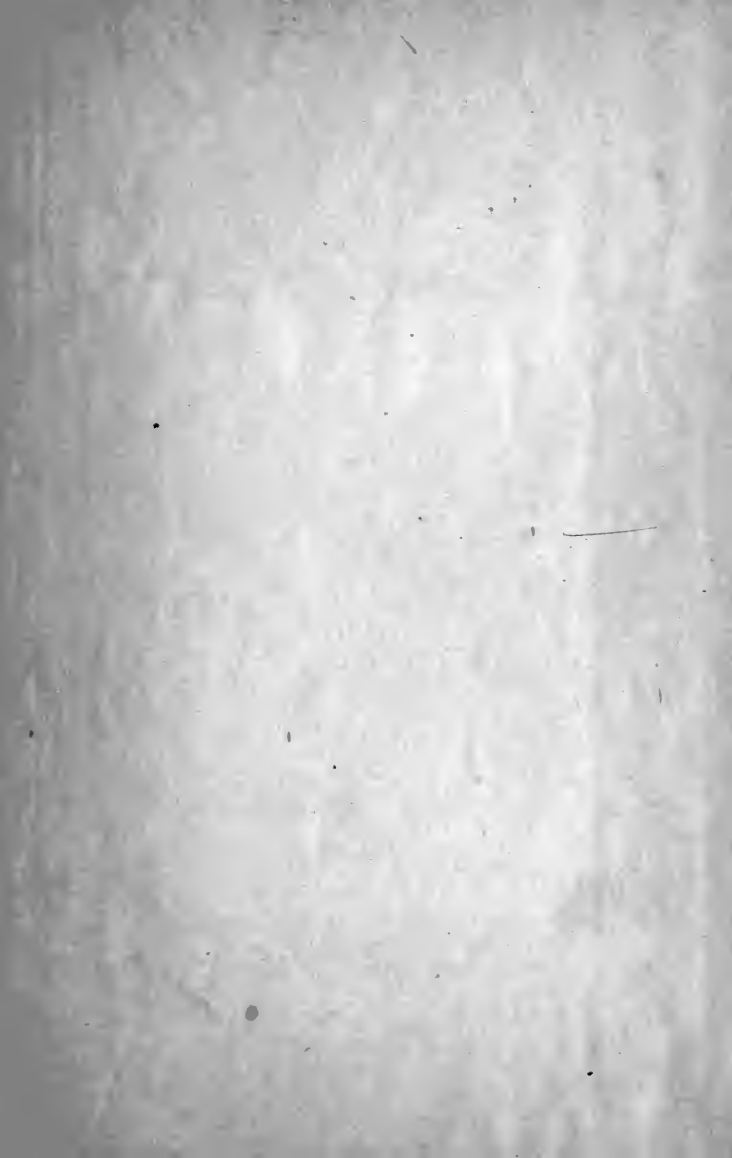


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The Kingsley English Texts

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# THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

BY

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

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*EDITED, WITH INTRODUCTION, NOTES, OUTLINE  
STUDY AND EXAMINATION QUESTIONS*

BY

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BOSTON, U. S. A.  
THE PALMER COMPANY  
120 Boylston Street

1910

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Recd. m. 2, 16 D. 11

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## P R E F A C E

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It is the aim of the editors of the *Kingsley English Texts* to furnish the student with all that is necessary for the proper understanding and appreciation of the books, without distracting his attention and burdening him with superfluous matters. Many publishers include with *THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL* a few other selections from the same author, in order to fill out the volume to larger dimensions. But tastes would differ as to which poems should be selected in such a case; and it seems better to advise the student to own a complete edition of a given author's works, and select for himself after thoroughly mastering a single writing. The material found in the Introduction of the present volume, together with the Outline Study and Examination Questions, should furnish the reader with a good working knowledge of this particular poem, and stimulate his interest in the other writings of the author.



## INTRODUCTION

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### I. THE MOTIF OF "THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL"

The office of true poetry is not to amuse or instruct, but to develop the emotional side of human nature, to stimulate the higher and nobler instincts which belong to the spiritual rather than to the animal nature of man. The emotions to which the poet may successfully appeal are numberless. Love, religious devotion, pride of race and ancestry have, in all ages, furnished fruitful themes for the noblest song; but the poet's art is never more worthily employed than when he appeals to man to forget for the moment the animal instinct of self-preservation and self-gratification, and to sacrifice himself for the glory of service to his kind.

Differing circumstances demand different forms of self-sacrifice. At the very dawn of our civilization we read that the Greeks, who, more than any other race, loved life and dreaded death, were inspired by the war songs of Tyrtæus to throw themselves on hostile spears for the glory and advantage of their tribe. At a later period of European history, when the physically helpless were entirely at the mercy of the physically strong, the hero of song was the chivalrous knight errant, who devoted his strength and skill and daily risked his life for the protection of the helpless and oppressed. In

the present age, civilized man everywhere is bending all his energies toward the improvement of his condition, materially and intellectually; and animal instincts prompt to hardness of heart, greed, and a selfish disregard for the feelings and aspirations of others. In this struggle, the weaker individual needs neither champion nor protector; he needs help; and he alone can be a benefactor to mankind who is content to share where he might excel, and who uses superior abilities or advantages to advance, not to hinder, the aspirations of the less fortunate.

This is the inspiring note of *THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL*. It is nothing that Sir Launfal is willing to relieve the immediate necessities of the beggar; to be praiseworthy he must lend his strength to the fight against the adverse conditions to which the beggar has been forced to succumb. It is not heroism, but base desertion, when the strong and well-equipped knight forces his way to a higher spiritual plane, and leaves misery and degradation behind him.

The mediæval garb of *THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL* is nothing more than a fancy dress—a name and a few accessories borrowed at random from the overflowing storehouses of the literature of chivalry. Mediæval customs and the language and legends of chivalry may be studied to better advantage in other connections. This poem should be studied for its much needed moral lesson, its high literary finish and the exquisite word paintings of summer and winter scenery with which it has enriched the English language.

## II. SOURCE AND TEACHING OF "THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL"

**Suggestion.**—See Outline Study.

## III. THE MEDIEVAL CASTLE

The mediæval castle was much more than the residence of a wealthy landowner. It was a garrisoned fortress designed for the double purpose of holding the manor or barony in subjection to its lord, and of protecting it from external enemies. Over the serfs, who tilled the manor land, the lord of the castle exercised a dominion limited only by the respect which he might feel for the distant and weak royal power, and for the spiritual authority of the Church. This power, in the hands of tyrants, made the castle a terrible engine of oppression to the surrounding country; but, when the lord was a just and humane man, the castle was resorted to by all classes as a source of justice, protection and relief.

The castle, whose lord was reputed to be a patron of the principles of true chivalry, was constantly thronged with guests: knights in quest of adventure, men-at-arms looking for employment, wandering friars, gleemen and minstrels, merchants, and, like the skeleton at the feast, the begging victims of the loathsome diseases and deformities so common in the Middle Ages. All of these were entertained according to their several degrees, and favored according to their deserts and the ability of the lord of the castle.

The castle was not a single building, but rather a group of buildings embraced in one system of defense. Around the whole was the ditch or moat, usually dry, but filled with water in time of siege. Inside the moat was the wall, about eight feet thick and twenty feet high, surmounted by a parapet for the protection of the defending garrison. The chief feature of the wall was the great gate between two thick and lofty towers. The gate itself was a wooden door, with iron clamps; in front of it the portcullis, a heavy, wrought-iron grate, slid up and down in grooves of the masonry. The drawbridge across the moat was directly in front of the gate, and, when drawn up, completely closed the entrance. Within this wall was the main courtyard of the castle, lined with offices, barracks, etc. This courtyard surrounded the inner castle, which was also defended by ditch and wall. Within the inner wall was a small courtyard appropriated to domestic uses; and, in the center of all, was the donjon, or keep, a tower, five or six stories high, surmounted by turrets and battlements. The baronial hall was usually on the second floor of this tower, and the private apartments of the lord and his family were on the floor above.

The existing remains of castles, and the few mediæval castles still kept in repair, of which Windsor Castle in England is perhaps the best example, show only the keep; but the distinction between the keep and the castle as a whole must be kept in mind if we wish to understand the descriptions of these fortresses in the literature of chivalry.

# THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

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## PRELUDE I

Prelude I brings to the reader the picture of an ideal June day, perfect in every detail: the soft green of hill and valley dotted with the yellow of marigold and buttercup and dandelion; the streams, not yet shrunk with summer drought, trickling softly through fields and meadows filled with all manner of growing things; and, over all, the fleckless blue sky. The spirit of the growing season animates all living things. Every plant and bush, every blade of grass, swarms with insect life; birds are singing and cattle are lowing for very joy of living; and, finally, into the human heart, too, creeps the cheering and inspiring influence of the year "at its flood."

### I

Over his keys the musing organist,  
Beginning doubtfully and far away,  
First lets his fingers wander as they list,  
And builds a bridge from Dreamland<sup>1</sup> for his lay:  
Then, as the touch of his loved instrument  
Gives hope and fervor, nearer draws his theme,  
First guessed by faint auroral flushes sent  
Along the wavering vista of his dream.

1. See Outline Study, Note 2.

## II

Not only around our infancy  
 Doth heaven with all its splendors lie;<sup>2</sup>  
 Daily, with souls that cringe and plot,  
 We Sinais<sup>3</sup> climb and know it not;  
 Over our manhood bend the skies;  
     Against our fallen and traitor lives  
 The great winds utter prophecies;<sup>4</sup>  
     With our faint hearts the mountain strives;  
 Its arms outstretched, the druid<sup>5</sup> wood  
     Waits with its benedicite;<sup>6</sup>  
 And to our age's drowsy blood  
     Still shouts the inspiring sea.<sup>7</sup>

## III

Earth gets its price for what Earth gives us;<sup>8</sup>  
     The beggar is taxed for a corner to die in,  
 The priest hath his fee who comes and shrives<sup>9</sup> us,  
     We bargain for the graves we lie in;  
 At the Devil's booth are all things sold,

2. From Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality"—  
**"Heaven lies about us in our infancy."**

3. Sinai was the Mountain of God, at the foot of which the children of Israel encamped while Moses "went up unto God."—Exodus xix. 3.

4. As did the Israelitish prophets against the sin and degeneracy of the chosen people. Lines 3-6 of stanza II are connected in thought.

5. **Explain the significance of the epithet.**

6. **"Bless ye the Lord,"**—a line from the Roman Catholic Church service.

7. *i. e.* Man, even in this prosaic age (**lines 11, 12, stanza II**), may find in every manifestation of Nature an incentive to a higher life.

8. **Give a specific illustration to support the statement of each line in stanza III. Point out a purely poetical word in this stanza.**

9. Gives spiritual consolation as a preparation for death.



Each ounce of dross costs its ounce of gold,  
 For a cap and bells<sup>10</sup> our lives we pay,  
 Bubbles we buy with a whole soul's tasking:  
 'Tis heaven alone that is given away,  
 'Tis only God may be had for the asking;  
 There is no price set on the lavish<sup>11</sup> summer,  
 And June may be had by the poorest comer.

## IV

And what is so rare<sup>12</sup> as a day in June?  
 Then, if ever, come perfect days;  
 Then Heaven tries the earth if it be in tune,  
 And over it softly her warm ear lays:<sup>13</sup>  
 Whether we look, or whether we listen,  
 We hear life murmur, or see it glisten;  
 Every clod feels a stir of might,  
 An instinct within it that reaches and towers,  
 And, grasping blindly above it for light,  
 Climbs to a soul in grass and flowers;  
 The flush of life may well be seen  
 Thrilling back over hills and valleys;  
 The cowslip<sup>14</sup> startles in meadows green,  
 The buttercup catches the sun in its chalice,<sup>15</sup>

10. The insignia of the licensed jester. This line suggests the truth which has ever rankled in the mind of the poet, viz., that a poet must please the multitude or remain unknown.

11. Show that this epithet is a most appropriate one in this connection.

12. So singularly fine.

13. On what is the metaphor of lines 3 and 4 founded?

14. The Marsh Marigold.

15. Are chalice and cup absolutely synonymous?

And there's never a leaf or a blade too mean<sup>16</sup>  
 To be some happy creature's palace;<sup>17</sup>  
 The little bird sits at his door in the sun,  
     Atilt like a blossom among the leaves,  
 And lets his illumined being o'errun  
     With the deluge of summer it receives;  
 His mate feels the eggs beneath her wings,  
 And the heart in her dumb breast flutters and sings;  
 He sings to the wide world, and she to her nest,—  
 In the nice ear of Nature which song is the best?

## V

Now is the high-tide of the year,  
     And whatever of life hath ebbed away  
 Comes flooding back with a ripply cheer  
     Into every bare inlet and creek and bay;<sup>18</sup>  
 Now the heart is so full that a drop overfills it,  
 We are happy now because God so wills it;  
 No matter how barren the past may have been,  
 'Tis enough for us now that the leaves are green;  
 We sit in the warm shade and feel right well  
 How the sap creeps up and the blossoms swell;  
 We may shut our eyes, but we cannot help knowing  
 That skies are clear and grass is growing;

16. **Illustrate the meaning of lines 15 and 16.**

17. Comment on the rhyme.

**Suggestion.**—Point out two verbs in stanza IV which are used in an unusual manner? Does the poet use *startles* with its transitive or its intransitive meaning? (**Consult the Dictionary.**) Commit to memory stanza III.

18. Explain the metaphor of these four lines and express the thought in literal language.

The breeze comes whispering in our ear  
That dandelions are blossoming near,  
That maize<sup>19</sup> has sprouted, that streams are flowing,  
That the river is bluer than the sky,  
That the robin is plastering his house<sup>20</sup> hard by ;  
And if the breeze kept the good news back,  
For other couriers we should not lack ;  
We could guess it all by yon heifer's lowing,—  
And hark ! how clear bold chanticleer,  
Warmed with the new wine of the year,  
Tells all in his lusty crowing !<sup>21</sup>

## VI

Joy comes, grief goes, we know not how ;  
Everything is happy now,  
Everything is upward striving ;  
'Tis as easy now for the heart to be true  
As for grass to be green or skies to be blue,—  
'Tis the natural way of living :  
Who knows whither the clouds have fled ?  
In the unscarred heaven they leave no wake ;<sup>22</sup>  
And the eyes forget the tears they have shed,  
The heart forgets its sorrow and ache ;  
The soul partakes the season's youth,

**19. What is the American name for this grain? Why does the poet use this word instead?**

**20. Paraphrase the line. Explain the last two words.**

**21. Cite the passages in stanzas III and IV which show that the poet's description applies particularly to June in New England.**

**22. To what does the poet compare the clouds and the sky? Does the word "unscarred" have a place in such a metaphor?**

And the sulphurous<sup>23</sup> rifts of passion and woe  
Lie deep 'neath a silence pure and smooth,  
Like burnt-out craters healed with snow.<sup>24</sup>  
What wonder if Sir Launfal now  
Remembered the keeping of his vōw?<sup>25</sup>

23. Referring to the rifts in the ground in volcanic districts, emitting sulphurous vapor and other gases.

24. Paraphrase the expression **healed with snow**.

25. To search for the Holy Grail.

**Suggestion.**—(1) What is the teaching of stanzas IV and V in regard to the influence of Nature upon the human mind? (2) Point out two colloquialisms in stanza IV. Are both of them peculiar to New England? (3) Note the change in meter between stanzas IV and V, and describe the effect produced by the change.

## PART I

Part I of THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL presents a picture no less vivid than that of Prelude I, but one which is wholly imaginative in its nature. It is a hot June morning; cattle are standing knee deep in the cool water of the little pools; flocks of crows are flapping lazily across the sky; birds are singing blithely in the trees, whose leaves are dancing in the soft summer breeze. In the midst of this June splendor frowns a gloomy mediæval castle, from whose ponderous gates all those who are praying for succor are turned mercilessly away. Suddenly, into the foreground of the picture, flashes Sir Launfal, clad in gleaming armor, and prepared to start on his quest for the Grail, turning his back on all the sorrow and wretchedness of the people whose lord he is; young and winsome, haughty and imperious,—a typical mediæval knight. In a dark corner of the gateway crouches a loathsome leper, clad in pitiful rags,—“*the one blot on the summer morn.*” The knight and the beggar meet for an instant only; but in that brief meeting the character of the knight is revealed, the keynote of the whole poem is struck, and its moral lesson is brought home to the reader with convincing force.

## I

"My golden spurs<sup>26</sup> now bring to me,  
 And bring to me my richest mail,  
 For to-morrow I go over land and sea  
 In search of the Holy Grail;<sup>27</sup>  
 Shall never a bed for me be spread,  
 Nor shall a pillow be under my head,  
 Till I begin my vow to keep;  
 Here on the rushes<sup>28</sup> will I sleep,  
 And perchance there may come a vision true  
 Ere day create the world anew."

Slowly Sir Launfal's eyes grew dim,  
 Slumber fell like a cloud on him,  
 And into his soul the vision<sup>29</sup> flew.

## II

The crows flapped over by twos and threes,  
 In the pool drownd the cattle up to their knees,  
 The little birds sang as if it were  
 The one day of summer in all the year,  
 And the very leaves seemed to sing on the trees:  
 The castle<sup>30</sup> alone in the landscape lay.  
 Like an outpost of winter, dull and gray;  
 'Twas the proudest hall in the North Countree,<sup>31</sup>

**26. Under what circumstances did a knight receive the golden spurs?**

27. Study Outline Study, Notes 3 and 4.

28. The ordinary covering of the floor of a mediæval castle hall.

29. There is no further real action in the poem until stanza IX of Part II; all between is merely the dream of Sir Launfal.

**30. Does the feudal castle of stanza II belong properly to the setting of stanzas III and IV of the Prelude to Part I?**

31. When used by Londoners and the people of Southern England, this expression means that part of England north of the river Trent, particularly Yorkshire.

And never its gates might opened be,  
 Save to lord or lady of high degree ;  
 Summer besieged it on every side,  
 But the churlish<sup>32</sup> stone her assaults defied ;  
 She could not scale the chilly wall,  
 Though round it for leagues her pavilions tall  
 Stretched left and right,  
 Over the hills and out of sight ;  
     Green and broad was every tent,  
     And out of each a murmur went  
 Till the breeze fell off at night.<sup>33</sup>

## III

The drawbridge dropped with a surly clang,  
 And through the dark arch a charger sprang,  
 Bearing Sir Launfal, the maiden knight,<sup>34</sup>  
 In his gilded mail, that flamed so bright  
 It seemed the dark castle had gathered all  
 Those shafts the fierce sun had shot over its wall  
     In his siege of three hundred summers long,  
 And binding them all in one blazing sheaf,  
     Had cast them forth : so, young and strong,  
 And lightsome as a locust-leaf,  
 Sir Launfal flashed forth in his unscarred<sup>35</sup> mail,  
 To seek in all climes for the Holy Grail.

**32. State the exact significance of the adjective.**

**33. Explain the application in each detail of the sustained metaphor of stanza II.**

**34. A knight whose prowess was yet to be proven.**

**35. Show that this is an appropriate adjective in this connection.**

**Suggestion.**—Point out two unusual verbs in stanza II, and state the exact meaning conveyed by each.

## IV

It was morning on hill and stream and tree,  
And morning in the young knight's heart ;  
Only the castle moodily  
Rebuffed the gifts of the sunshine free,  
And gloomed by itself apart ;  
The season brimmed all other things up  
Full as the rain fills the pitcher-plant's cup.

## V

As Sir Launfal made morn<sup>36</sup> through the darksome<sup>37</sup>  
gate,  
He was 'ware of a leper,<sup>38</sup> crouched by the same,  
Who begged with his hand and moaned as he sate ;<sup>39</sup>  
And a loathing over Sir Launfal came ;  
The sunshine went out of his soul with a thrill,  
The flesh 'neath his armor did shrink and crawl,  
And midway its leap his heart stood still  
Like a frozen waterfall ;  
For this man, so foul and bent of stature,  
Rasped harshly against his dainty nature,  
And seemed the one blot on the summer morn,—  
So he tossed him a piece of gold in scorn.

36. Brightened up the dark passageway.

37. Give the force of the suffix "some." Mention another adjective with this suffix used earlier in the poem.

38. The loathsome disease of leprosy, now almost unknown in Europe and North America, was much dreaded in the Middle Ages. Pilgrims and crusading soldiers frequently contracted it in the East, and it was supposed to be virulently contagious.

39. Criticise this line.



The leper raised not the gold from the dust :  
“Better to me the poor man’s crust,  
Better the blessing of the poor,  
Though I turn me empty from his door ;  
That is no true alms which the hand can hold ;  
He gives nothing but worthless gold  
Who gives from a sense of duty ;  
But he who gives a slender mite,  
And gives to that which is out of sight,  
That thread of the all-sustaining Beauty  
Which runs through all and doth all unite,—  
The hand cannot clasp the whole of his alms,  
The heart outstretches its eager palms,<sup>40</sup>  
For a god goes with it and makes it store  
To the soul that was starving in darkness before.”<sup>41</sup>

40. Is such a personification justifiable ?

41. See Outline Study, B, III, 1 and Note 5.

## PRELUDE II

In Prelude II the pictured scene has changed. The soft breeze, laden with the odors of June and bringing with it a thrill of joy to every heart, has become a chill wind "carrying a shiver everywhere." Again it is morning; but the cold December sun shines on bare meadows and leafless trees and on a silent brook sheathed in a shroud of ice. Again the castle rises in the background of the picture in sharp contrast to the scene around it; but now it is the landscape which is bleak and drear, while the castle, with the glow of its great Christmas fire, radiates warmth and cheer.

## I

Down swept the chill wind from the mountain peak,<sup>42</sup>

From the snow five thousand summers old;

On open wold<sup>43</sup> and hill-top bleak

It had gathered all the cold,

And whirled it like sleet on the wanderer's cheek;

It carried a shiver everywhere

From the unleaved boughs and pastures bare;

The little brook heard it and built a roof

'Neath which he could house him, winter-proof;

All night by the white stars' frosty gleams

42. Are there any mountain peaks covered with perpetual snow in the north of England?

43. An upland open plain.

He groined his arches<sup>44</sup> and matched his beams;  
Slender and clear were his crystal spars<sup>45</sup>  
As the lashes of light that trim the stars:  
He sculptured every summer delight  
In his halls and chambers out of sight;  
Sometimes his tinkling waters slipt  
Down through a frost-leaved forest-crypt,  
Long, sparkling aisles of steel-stemmed trees  
Bending to counterfeit a breeze;  
Sometimes the roof no fretwork knew  
But silvery mosses that downward grew;  
Sometimes it was carved in sharp relief  
With quaint arabesques of ice-fern leaf;  
Sometimes it was simply smooth and clear  
For the gladness of heaven to shine through, and here  
He had caught the nodding bulrush-tops  
And hung them thickly with diamond drops,  
Which crystallised the beams of moon and sun,  
And made a star of every one:  
No mortal builder's most rare device  
Could match this winter-palace of ice;  
'Twas as if every image that mirrored lay  
In his depths serene through the summer day,  
Each flitting shadow of earth and sky,  
Lest the happy model should be lost,  
Had been mimicked in fairy masonry  
By the elfin builders of the frost.<sup>46</sup>

44. *i. e.* Made a vaulted roof of intersecting arches.

45. Rafters.

46. **Reproduce this description of the frozen brook, stating each fact in literal language. How many of these facts have come under your own observation?**

## II

Within the hall are song and laughter,  
 The cheeks of Christmas glow red and jolly,  
 And sprouting is every corbel<sup>47</sup> and rafter  
 With lightsome green of ivy and holly;  
 Through the deep gulf of the chimney wide  
 Wallows the Yule-log's<sup>48</sup> roaring tide;  
 The broad flame-pennons droop and flap  
 And belly and tug as a flag in the wind;  
 Like a locust shrills the imprisoned sap,  
 Hunted to death in its galleries blind;  
 And swift little troops of silent sparks,  
 Now pausing, now scattering away as in fear,  
 Go threading the soot-forest's tangled darks<sup>49</sup>  
 Like herds of startled deer.<sup>50</sup>

## III

But the wind without was eager and sharp,<sup>51</sup>  
 Of Sir Launfal's gray hair it makes a harp,  
 And rattles and wrings  
 The icy strings,  
 Singing, in dreary monotone,  
 A Christmas carol of its own,  
 Whose burden still, as he might guess,  
 Was—"Shelterless, shelterless, shelterless!"

47. A projection of the wall to support a beam.

48. A great log rolled into the chimney fireplace at Christmas.

49. **What is the significance of this adjective?**

50. **Describe, in your own words, the familiar picture presented in lines 11-14 of stanza II.**

51. **With what earlier scene does this form a striking contrast?**

## IV

The voice of the seneschal<sup>52</sup> flared like a torch<sup>53</sup>  
As he shouted the wanderer away from the porch,  
And he sat in the gateway and saw all night  
The great hall-fire, so cheery and bold,  
Through the window-slits<sup>54</sup> of the castle old,  
Build out its piers of ruddy light  
Against the drift of the cold.

52. The servant in charge of the household.

53. Criticise the simile. How does it differ as to source from the figures used hitherto? What idea as to the voice of the seneschal does this simile give you.

54. The windows of the mediæval castle were merely long, narrow slits in the thick stone wall.

## PART II

As in Part I, Sir Launfal fills the foreground of the picture; but the young knight, in his gilded mail has become a gray-haired outcast, clad in the rags of a mendicant. The gates of the castle are still closed to the needy, in spite of the glow of the Christmas fire; and Sir Launfal finds his only shelter from the icy wind in the dark corner of the gateway where the leper had crouched, on that June day so long ago when the quest for the Grail had begun. Again the leper and Sir Launfal meet; and in this second meeting the climax of the story is reached, for Sir Launfal's vision fades and he awakes to confront the realities of life.

## I

There was never a leaf on bush or tree,<sup>1</sup>  
The bare boughs rattled shudderingly;  
The river was dumb, and could not speak,

For the weaver Winter its shroud had spun;<sup>2</sup>  
A single crow on the tree-top bleak.

From his shining feathers shed off the cold sun;  
Again it was morning, but shrunk and cold,  
As if her veins were sapless and old  
And she rose up decrepitley  
For a last dim look at earth and sea.

1. See Outline Study, C, II, 6.

2. How does this figure compare with that used in the Prelude?

## II

Sir Launfal turned from his own hard gate,  
For another heir in his earldom sate ;  
An old, bent man, worn out and frail,  
He came back from seeking the Holy Grail ;  
Little he recked of his earldom's loss,  
No more on his surcoat<sup>3</sup> was blazoned the cross,<sup>4</sup>  
But deep in his soul the sign he wore,  
The badge of the suffering and the poor.

## III

Sir Launfal's raiment thin and spare  
Was idle mail<sup>5</sup> 'gainst the barbed air,  
For it was just at the Christmas time ;  
So he mused, as he sat, of a sunnier clime,  
And sought for a shelter from cold and snow  
In the light and warmth of long ago ;  
He sees the snake-like caravan crawl  
O'er the edge of the desert, black and small,  
Then nearer and nearer, till, one by one,  
He can count the camels in the sun,  
As over the red-hot sands they pass  
To where, in its slender necklace of grass,  
The little spring laughed and leapt in the shade,  
And with its own self like an infant played,  
And waved its signal of palms.

3. The coat worn over the armor.

4. The distinguishing mark of the Crusader. To search for the Holy Grail and to uphold the cross against the infidel in Palestine are in this poem regarded as one and the same "quest," although they are two distinct motives in the literature of Chivalry.

5. Compare with Part I, stanza I, line 2.

## IV

“For Christ’s sweet sake, I beg an alms:”—  
The happy camels may reach the spring,  
But Sir Launfal sees naught save the grewsome thing,  
The leper, lank as the rain-blanchèd bone,  
That cowerèd beside him, a thing as lone  
And white as the ice-isles of Northern seas,  
In the desolate horror of his disease.<sup>6</sup>

## V

And Sir Launfal said,—“I behold in thee  
An image of Him who died on the tree;  
Thou also hast had thy crown of thorns,—  
Thou also hast had the world’s buffets and scorns,—  
And to thy life were not denied  
The wounds in the hands and feet and side:  
Mild Mary’s Son, acknowledge me;  
Behold, through him, I give to thee!”<sup>7</sup>

## VI

Then the soul of the leper stood up in his eyes  
And looked at Sir Launfal, and straightway he  
Remembered in what a haughtier guise  
He had flung an alms to leprosie,  
When he caged<sup>8</sup> his young life up in gilded mail  
And set forth in search of the Holy Grail.  
The heart within him was ashes and dust;

6. What facts give point to these similes of stanza IV?

7. See Outline Study, Note 5, paragraph 2.

8. What is the significance of this verb?



He parted in twain his single crust,  
He broke the ice on the streamlet's brink,  
And gave the leper to eat and drink ;  
'Twas a mouldy crust of coarse brown bread,  
    'Twas water out of a wooden bowl,—  
Yet with fine wheaten bread was the leper fed,  
    And 'twas red wine he drank with his thirsty soul.<sup>9</sup>

## VII

As Sir Launfal mused with a downcast face,  
A light shone round about the place ;  
The leper no longer crouched at his side,  
But stood before him glorified,  
Shining and tall and fair and straight  
As the pillar that stood by the Beautiful Gate,—<sup>10</sup>  
Himself the Gate<sup>11</sup> whereby men can  
Enter the temple of God in Man.

## VIII

His words were shed softer than leaves from the pine,  
And they fell on Sir Launfal as snows on the brine,  
That mingle their softness and quiet in one  
With the shaggy<sup>12</sup> unrest they float down upon ;  
And the voice that was calmer than silence said,  
“ Lo, it is I, be not afraid !  
In many climes, without avail,  
Thou hast spent thy life for the Holy Grail ;

9. See Outline Study, C, I, 4.

10. “The gate of the Temple, which is called beautiful,” where Peter healed the lame beggar.—ACTS iii.

11. “I am the door.”—**John x. 9.**

12. Give the meaning of **shaggy unrest**, as you understand it.

Behold, it is here,—this cup which thou  
Didst fill at the streamlet for me but now;  
This crust is my body broken for thee,<sup>13</sup>  
This water His blood that died on the tree;  
The Holy Supper is kept, indeed,  
In whatso we share with another's need;  
Not what we give, but what we share.  
For the gift without the giver is bare;  
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three—  
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and me.”<sup>14</sup>

## IX

Sir Launfal awoke as from a swoond:<sup>15</sup>  
“The Grail in my castle here is found!”<sup>16</sup>  
Hang my idle armor up on the wall,  
Let it be the spider's banquet-hall;  
He must be fenced with stronger mail  
Who would seek and find the Holy Grail.”

## X

The castle gate stands open now,  
And the wanderer is welcome to the hall  
As the hangbird is to the elm-tree bough;  
No longer scowl the turrets tall,  
The Summer's long siege at last is o'er;  
When the first poor outcast went in at the door,

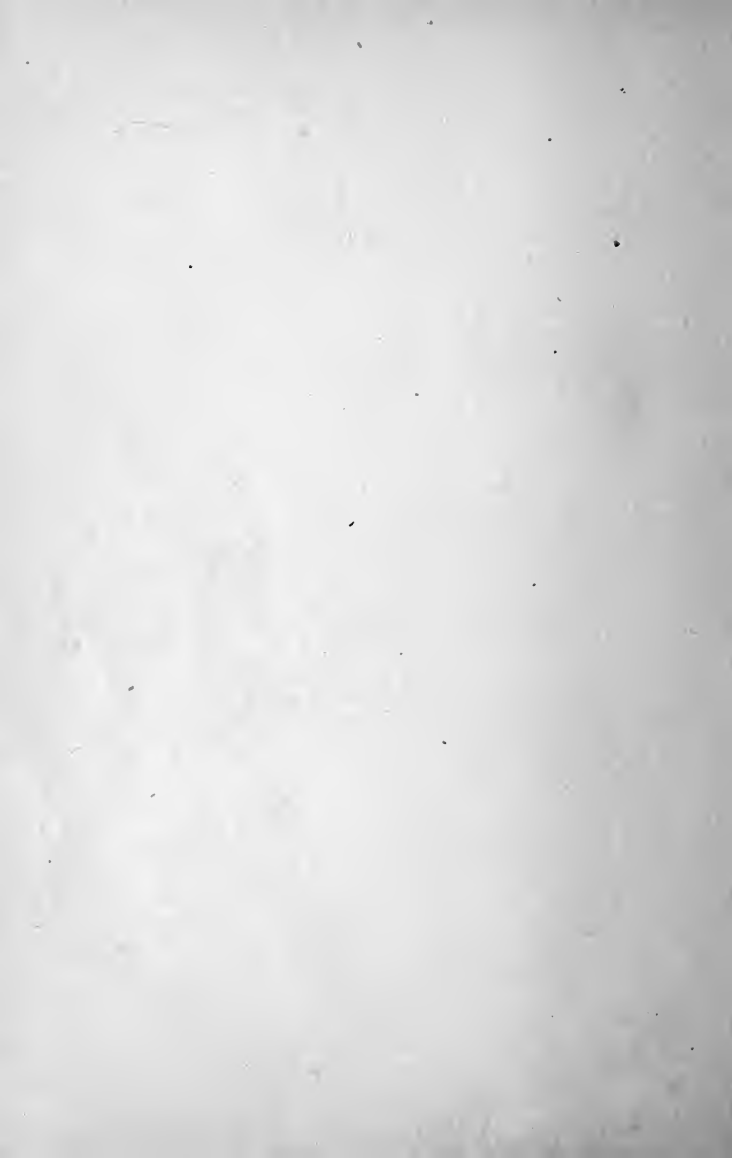
13. A paraphrase of the address of Christ to his disciples at the  
“Last Supper.”—**Luke xxii. 19-20.**

14. See Outline Study, C, I, 4.

15. **Give the modern spelling of the word.**

16. See Outline Study, B, III, 2.

She entered with him in disguise,  
And mastered the fortress by surprise;  
There is no spot she loves so well on ground,  
She lingers and smiles there the whole year round;  
The meanest serf on Sir Launfal's land  
Has hall and bower at his command;  
And there's no poor man in the North Countree  
But is lord of the earldom as much as he.



# OUTLINE STUDY

NO. 10

## THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

(JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL, 1819-1891)



- A. PREPARATORY WORK.—American Literature;  
Source of *The Vision of Sir Launfal*.
- B. FIRST READING.—The Narrative of the Poem;  
The Moral of the Poem.
- C. SECOND READING.—Construction of the Poem;  
Study of the Text.
- D. THIRD READING.—Literary Criticism.
- E. SUPPLEMENTARY WORK.—James Russell Lowell;  
Supplementary Reading; Theme Subjects.

## A. PREPARATORY WORK



# AMERICAN LITERATURE; SOURCE OF THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL



### I. PERIODS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

#### 1. Colonial Age, 1640-1760.

*a.* Character of the literature,—theological.

#### 2. Revolutionary Age, 1760-1830.

*a.* Character of the literature,—political and patriotic.

#### 3. Pioneer Period, 1830-1845.

*a.* Representative writers,—Irving and Cooper.

*Suggestion 1.* Look up the department of literature filled by each.

*b.* The real literature of America begins.

#### 4. National Age, 1845—.

*a.* "Golden Age of American Literature," 1845-1880.

## (1.) "The Great Writers":—

- (a.) James Russell Lowell.
- (b.) Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
- (c.) John Greenleaf Whittier.
- (d.) Ralph Waldo Emerson,
- (e.) William Cullen Bryant.
- (f.) Oliver Wendell Holmes.
- (g.) Nathaniel Hawthorne.

*Suggestion 2.* What department of literature does each fill? Of these writers, which is the oldest?

II. SOURCE OF *The Vision of Sir Launfal*

*Note 1.* THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL has for its foundation an old tradition which formed a part of a set of mediæval legends whose central figure was King Arthur of Britain. When or where these legends had their origin no one knows; but they are a part of that branch of fiction known as the "Romance," which, in its most distinctive form, belongs to Europe and the Middle Ages. Of all these mediæval romances, the most widely known is the *Arthurian Cycle*, which, beyond a doubt, had its origin in England, in the songs sung by wandering harpers and minstrels in the banquet hall and the camp; songs celebrating the achievements of King Arthur, that "goodly king," whose name and exploits are known to every schoolboy.

The first prose compilation of these Arthurian romances was made in France, in the latter half of the thirteenth century, under the title *Morte Arthure*. In 1485, the French *Morte Arthure* was translated into English by one Thomas Malory, and was printed with the same title as the French original. From this compilation the stories have come down to us. This Arthurian cycle consists of several distinct legends, of which the one entitled the *San Graal*, or *Holy Grail*, has been used by Lowell as the *motif* of his poem. In order to understand the story, the pupils must be told the following facts:—

## 1. KING ARTHUR'S ROUND TABLE.

*Note 2.* This was a literal *round* table, made by the magician Merlin and given to King Arthur on his wedding day. It seated one hundred and fifty knights, and these knights formed an order of

knighthood called *The Knights of the Round Table*, the chief of whom were Sir Launcelot, Sir Tristram, and Sir Lamerock. A favorite enterprise of these *Knights of the Round Table* was to go forth from the court at Camelot in a "quest" for the *Holy Grail*; a quest which no one could "achieve" who had committed any sin. At the round table was a seat called the *Siege Perilous*, because no one could sit in it and live except him who was destined to achieve the quest of the *Holy Grail*. Sir Galahad, the sinless knight, finally achieved the quest.

## 2. THE HOLY GRAIL, OR SAN GRAAL.

*Note 3.* This was the cup from which our Saviour drank at the last supper with his disciples. When Joseph of Arimathea took our Lord's body from the cross, he received into the cup, already holy, many drops of blood from the Saviour's bleeding wounds, thus making the cup doubly sacred. Joseph carried the cup into England and kept it there, an object of adoration and pilgrimage for many years. In process of time one of its keepers broke the vow which bound him to be pure in thought and word and deed, whereupon the Holy Grail disappeared.

*Note 4.* It is very hard for the young student to understand just what the meaning of the Grail legend is, and he *must* understand it if he is to grasp the significance of the poem about to be studied. In the Mediæval Church, the bread and wine—the elements of the Eucharist when consecrated by the officiating priest—were supposed to be converted into the actual blood and body of Christ. In all descriptions of the Grail in Arthurian romances, it seems to be, not a real cup, but simply the visible presence of Christ into which the elements were believed to be converted after consecration.

Many of the knights were permitted to catch a glimpse of the Graal, and were healed of all their wounds thereby; but only Sir Galahad, as has been said, was successful in the quest.

When Sir Galahad achieved the quest of the Holy Graal, all that is meant is that he saw with his bodily eyes the visible Saviour into which the holy bread had been converted:—

"Then the bishop took a wafer that was made in the likeness of bread, and at the lifting up there came a figure in the likeness of a child, and the visage was as red and as bright as fire, and he smote himself into that bread; so they saw that the bread was formed of a fleshly man, and then he put it into the



holy vessel again. . . . Then the bishop took the holy vessel and came to Sir Galahad as he kneeled down, and there he received his Saviour."—*Sir Thomas Malory's Morte D'Arthur*.

"The Quest of the San Graal appears to be a religious allegory, representing the sinner's pursuit of justification through the blood of Christ, by the adventures of the knights in their quest."

## B. FIRST READING

# THE NARRATIVE OF THE POEM; MORAL OF THE POEM

## I. OUTLINE OF THE NARRATIVE

### 1. Part I.

a. Introduction.

b. Prelude I.—A June day.

(1.) *Its effect on nature.*

(2.) *Its effect on the mind.*

c. The story.

(1.) *Sir Launfal's vow.*

(2.) The vision.

(a.) Summer in the North of England.

(b.) *The castle.*

(c.) Sir Launfal starts on his quest.

(d.) *First adventure ; its outcome.*

## 2. Part II.

## a. Prelude II.—Winter.

(1.) Its effect on nature.

## b. The vision resumed.

(1.) Changes at the castle.

(2.) *Change in Sir Launfal.*

(3.) Drift of Sir Launfal's musings.

(4.) *The Leper and Sir Launfal.*(5.) *The leper's transformation.*

(6.) The voice.

## c. Sir Launfal awakes.

(1.) Lasting effect of his dream.

*Suggestion 3.* After the reading, which should be done aloud in class, has been finished, the pupils are expected to recite the story of the poem from the above outline, quoting *verbatim* the lines suggested by the italicised headings.

## II. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

*Suggestion 4.* Reproduce for written work.

*Note 5.* Sir Launfal, a young knight, proud of his lineage and his great possessions, and intolerant of every one who is not as well born as himself, decides to start forth on a quest for the Holy Grail, feeling sure that so upright and goodly a knight as he will succeed where so many others have failed. On his last night at home he falls asleep in the courtyard of his castle and dreams; and in his dream he sees himself setting out on his quest.

As he rides out of the castle gate a leper asks alms from him. The loathsome sight annoys the young lord, who has no sympathy with suffering and disease, so he scornfully tosses the beggar a piece of money and goes haughtily on his way. The leper does not touch the coin. He needs money badly enough, but he wants nothing that is given without sympathy.

The years pass on, and the pride and intolerance in the young knight's heart keep him from achieving his quest. As he grows older and sees more of the world around him; as his flashing, unscarred armor grows dingy and battered; as his riches and power fall away from him,—his arrogance gives place to humility, and his heart is filled with sympathy and loving-kindness toward suffering humanity. And one day he comes back—an old, white-haired man—to his castle, where a usurper reigns in his stead; and as he sits, himself a despised beggar, in the very gateway where he had so long before spurned the leper, he hears a voice asking for alms, and sees again a leper crouching beside him. Sir Launfal's heart goes out in loving compassion to the mendicant. In the name of the Christ he shares with him his last mouldy crust, and gives him a drink of water from his wooden bowl. Then the vision reaches its climax. The grewsome leper becomes a glorified being—the Christ in whose name the crust of bread was shared; and Sir Launfal's quest is ended; for the wooden bowl, which had seemed so poor a possession, is found to be the Holy Cup itself, revealed to him at last by the visible presence of Christ, because he has become perfect in sympathy and brotherly love.

Sir Launfal awakes and takes the lesson to heart. He realizes that it is not a material cup for which he ought to seek, but the presence of Christ, of which the cup is a symbol; and that this presence can only be found in a heart free from pride and full of loving-kindness. Therefore he changes his mode of living; opens his castle to the poor, the suffering, and the homeless; and does Christ's work in the world.

### III. *Two Lessons Taught by the Poem*

1. The sin of pride and arrogance; the beauty of sympathy and brotherly love.
2. That one need not travel far and do great deeds to win the favor of Christ.

## C. SECOND READING

# CONSTRUCTION OF THE POEM; STUDY OF THE TEXT

### I. CONSTRUCTION OF THE POEM

#### 1. Four parts strongly antithetical.

- a.* Two introductory verses giving the scheme of the composition.
- b.* Two preludes.

*Note 6.* The "bridge from dreamland," over which the poet's lay glides as dreamily as fall the notes from the fingers of the musing organist, is the first prelude whose close is marked by "the faint auroral flushes" (*i. e.*, suggestions of what is to come) which precede the theme formally introduced in the last line.

- c.* Two parts to the story proper.

#### 2. Theme of the poem.—The Legend of the Holy Grail.

#### 3. Fundamental thought. (See "Lessons Taught by the Poem.")

#### 4. Application of the myth.

- a. 'Twas a mouldy crust of coarse brown bread,  
 'Twas water out of a wooden bowl;  
 But with fine wheaten bread was the leper fed,  
 And 'twas red wine he drank with his  
 thirsty soul.

This actual transformation is the central thought of the old myth. Lowell's nineteenth century application of it is found in the lines,—

"The Holy Supper is kept indeed,  
 In whatso we share with another's need."

These, with the next two lines, furnish the text and moral for the poem.

## II. STUDY OF THE TEXT OF THE POEM

1. Glimpses of nature in the text.
2. Unfamiliar or purely poetical words found in the text.
3. Passages to paraphrase.
  - a. We Sinais climb and know it not.
  - b. For a cap and bells our lives we pay.
  - c. The buttercup catches the sun in its chalice.
  - d. Warmed by the new wine of the year.
  - e. Made morn through the darksome gate.
  - f. Lines 21-32 ; 254-257 ; 172-173 ; 217-224 ; 242-243.

*Suggestion 5.* Use a, b, and lines 217-224 for written work.

## 4. Time and place of the action of the story.

a. The north of England in the Middle Ages.

## 5. Topics for special study.

a. Mediæval customs.

(1.) Knights: their vows; mode of life of;  
winning the golden spurs.

(2.) Quests.

(3.) Mediæval castles.

(4.) Religion.

(5.) Classes of society.

(6.) Christmas in the North of England.

*Suggestion 6.* Use for written work.

## 6. The contrasts of the poem.

*Suggestion 7.* Bring out these contrasts by accurate quotation.

a. The glowing June day and the chill December night.

b. The little bird among the leaves, and the single crow on the tree-top.

c. The river bluer than the sky, and the stream shrouded in ice.

d. The young knight in his gilded mail, and the old man in his scanty raiment.

e. The loathsome leper, and the glorified mendicant.

f. The repellant castle, and the hospitable hall.

## 7. Pictures from the poem.

- a. A June day.
- b. The repellant castle.
- c. The frozen brook.
- d. A winter morning.
- e. The Christmas fire.
- f. The hospitable castle.
- g. Sir Launfal sets forth in his gilded mail.
- h. Sir Launfal and the leper.
- i. The being beautiful.
- j. The old man outside the gate.

*Suggestion 8.* The pupils are expected to enumerate all the details which enter into the composition of each picture.

## D. THIRD READING



# LITERARY CRITICISM OF THE POEM



## I. THE POEM AS A LITERARY COMPOSITION

### 1. Excellences of style.

- a. Diction graceful, harmonious, and simple.
- b. Characterized by a "fine sense of analogies."  
(*Discuss.*)
- c. Full of satisfying pictures.
- d. Distinguished by the use of striking Anglo-Saxon verbs and epithets.

- (1.) *Lavish* summer.
- (2.) *Thrilling, startles, atilt.*
- (3.) *Dumb* breast.
- (4.) *Chilly* wall.
- (5.) *Surly* clang.
- (6.) *Flapped, drowsed, gloomed, brimmed,*  
*wallows, flared.*

*Suggestion 9.* Discuss the exact significance of each italicized word. Give the context by quotation.

*Note 7.* The first prelude, the apotheosis of June, is said to be one of the finest examples of perfectly chosen words in the language.

## E. SUPPLEMENTARY WORK



# JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL; SUPPLEMENTARY READING; THEME SUBJECTS



## I. JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

1. Significant facts in his life.
2. Classification of his works.
3. Familiar poems.

*Note 8.* Lowell should be associated in the mind of the young reader with THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL and *Biglow Papers*.



## II. SUPPLEMENTARY READING

1. Tennyson's *Sir Galahad*.
2. Selected passages from *Idyls of the King*.
3. Extracts from *Morte D'Arthur* relating to the Holy Grail.

## III. THEME SUBJECTS

1. The Holy Grail.
2. The Knights of the Round Table.
3. Legends of Joseph of Arimathea.
4. The Yule Log.
5. Knighthood.
6. Quests.
7. *The gift without the giver is bare.*
8. Lessons of the poem.
9. A June day.
10. The frozen brook.
11. *For a cap and bells our lives we pay.*
12. *Earth gets its price for what earth gives us.*

## EXAMINATION QUESTIONS



1. To what class of poetical composition does THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL belong? Point out those literary excellences which make the poem a model of its class.

2. What position does THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL occupy among Lowell's poems? Is it a "typical" poem of its author? Give reasons for your answer. What position does THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL occupy in American Literature?

3. Give at some length the reason why THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL is so widely used as a school text for English work.

4. Explain the title and describe in detail the arrangement of the poem.

5. Explain the purpose of the preludes. Show the extent to which the first eight lines of Prelude I describe the author's treatment of his poem. Express in your own words the elusive thought of these lines.

6. What mediæval legend was the inspiration of this poem? Relate the legend briefly, and describe in full

the manner in which Lowell has adapted it to modern ideals and principles of conduct.

7. Have you read any other poems which have been inspired by this legend? If you have read any such poems, show how they have differed in treatment from the one under consideration.

8. Write a carefully prepared paper on the subject, "The Influence of Nature in Her Different Aspects Upon the Human Mind," paraphrasing lines 9-20, 57-68 and 80-93. Write another on the subject, "Earth Gets Its Price for What Earth Gives Us," paraphrasing lines 21-32.

9. Describe the manner in which the poet leads up to his description of a June day. Enumerate all the details which enter into the composition of this marvelous word picture. Are these details all true to your experience of the manifestations of nature in June?

10. On what is the figure in lines 33-36 founded? in lines 57-60? in lines 91-93?

11. Express in plain language each of the following lines:—

*The buttercup catches the sun in its chalice.*

*Climbs to a soul in grass and flowers.*

*Warmed with the new wine of the year.*

*As Sir Launfal made morn through the darksome gate.*

*The cheeks of Christmas grow red and jolly.*

*The soot-forest's tangled darks.*

*Girt his young life up in gilded mail.*

*And the voice that was calmer than silence said.*

12. Comment on the manner in which the poet formally introduces his theme after so long a prelude. What is the significance of *What wonder?*

13. What effect does the picture of lines 109, 110 produce? What picture does line 113 bring to your mind?

14. Show how the simile of line 115 is expanded into metaphor in lines 119-127. Express the poet's meaning in literal language.

15. Mr. Lowell has been criticised for placing an old feudal castle against a background of typical American scenery. What would be appropriate scenery for the setting of a feudal castle in the "North Countree"?

16. Show that the structure of lines 128-139 suggests the action of the narrative.

17. From this point relate briefly the story of the entire poem. What moral lesson does the poem teach? Point out at least two passages which might serve as texts for this moral lesson.

18. Treating the legend and Lowell's application of it as an extended allegory, give the symbolic meaning of the following features: *The Holy Grail, the young knight, the leper, the frowning castle, the coin tossed arrogantly to the leper, the mouldy crust humbly shared, the Being Beautiful, the transformed castle.*

19. Point out the contrasts between the two preludes. For what change in the gay young knight does Prelude II prepare you?

20. Describe in very literal language a frozen brook, and compare the details of your description with lines 181-210. Study these lines carefully, and select those passages which seem to you to exhibit the most graceful touches of fancy.

21. Paraphrase lines 211-224. What effect is produced by putting together lines 211-224 and the stanza included in lines 225-232?

22. Enumerate all the details which enter into the composition of the word picture of lines 240-249. What effect does it produce upon you? Is it as true to nature as is the description of the day in June? What is the poet's purpose in introducing lines 264-272?

23. THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL is full of striking Anglo-Saxon verbs and epithets. Make lists of ten each, and discuss the exact significance of each word. Discuss at some length the diction of the poem. Designate five lines which are exceptions to the general exquisite harmony of the poem.

24. Bring out by accurate quotation the following contrasts:—

- (1) The glowing June day and the chill December night.
- (2) The little bird among the leaves and the single crow on the tree-top.

- (3) The river bluer than the sky and the stream shrouded in ice.
- (4) The young knight in his gilded mail and the old man in his threadbare raiment.
- (5) The loathsome leper and the glorified mendicant.
- (6) The repellent castle and the hospitable hall.

25. Write a short paper on each of the following subjects :—

- (1) *The Moral Effect of THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL in the Class Room.*
- (2) *The sin of pride and arrogance, and the beauty of sympathy and brotherly love taught and illustrated by the poem.*
- (3) “ *Who gives himself with his aims feeds three—Himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me.*”

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